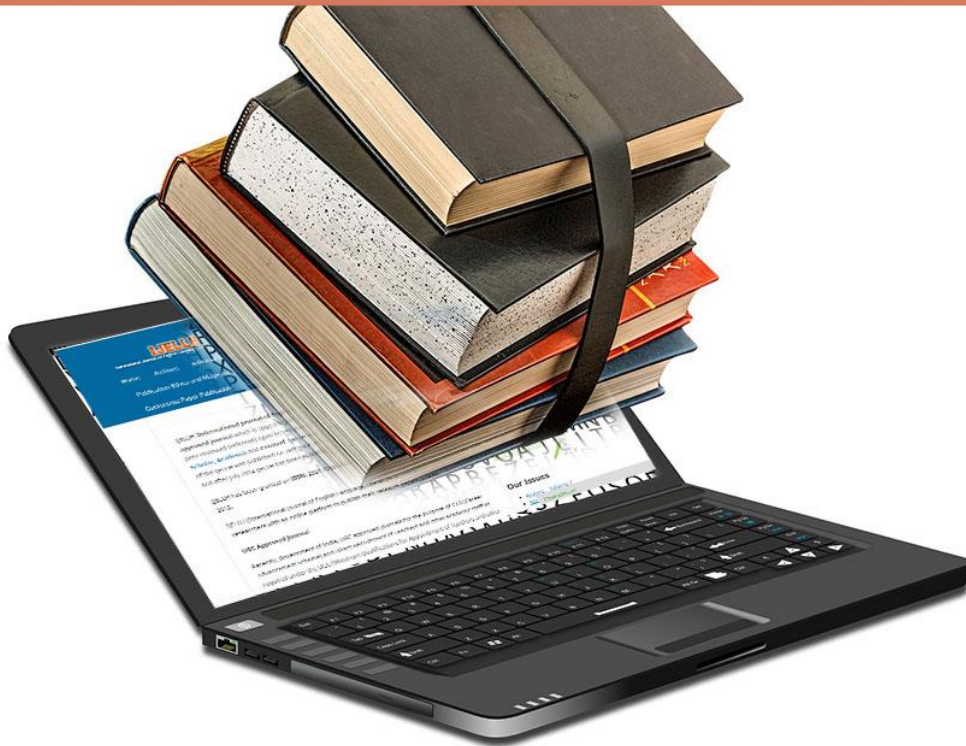


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R.Sudharsan

Research Scholar, Department of English,

Rajah Serfoji Government College, Autonomous,

Thanjavur-5. Tamil Nadu, India

sudharsanraj@rediffmail.com

Dr.P. Thiyagarajan

Assistant Professor of English,

Rajah Serfoji Government College, Autonomous,

Thanjavur-5. Tamil Nadu, India

Dr.S.Shanmugasundaram

Assistant Professor of English

Rajah Serfoji Government College, Autonomous,

Thanjavur-5. Tamil Nadu, India

srishanmuga75@gmail.com

The Impact of Writing Tasks with Reference to Government College Students in Thanjavur

Abstract

There are a number of reasons that could affect the writing capacity of the ESL learners. It may be categorized under three major heads namely psychological, pedagogical and linguistic. This paper attempts to present the efficacy of certain writing tasks used by the ESL learners studying in one of the government colleges(Rajah Serfoji Government College,

Thanjavur-5) in the District of Thanjavur, South India. It focuses on the following research question Whether the tasks given, (after considering their appropriateness) for writing practice assist the L2 learner to gain in their ability to write proficiently? It also makes use of scaffolding principle in order to design the tasks, used for this study.

Key words: tasks, scaffolding principle, pedagogical, linguistic

1.Introduction

Though there are a number of definitions, a class room task may be defined as “a piece of class room work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing and integrating in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form” Nunan 1993)

Task based learning centres around a variety of tasks that engage the learner to comprehend and manipulate in the second language. The use of learner- friendly tasks inside the class room has always been interesting and challenging activity for the teacher. Hence, Task based learning is one of the significant areas, that bring in new research insights in every new task designed in tune with the level of the learner. Therefore, task based class room practice is concerned with many factors such as the learners input, the role of the teacher, learners ability to focus on meaning rather than form, their ability to work freely with the task, their ability to use strategies, their individual difference and so on. Further, the effectiveness of the tasks as a stimulus to learning (AllWright 1981) is recognized by many scholars.

Academic writing in L2 depends on a variety of skills of the learners and it is a psycho linguistic process. Current practice in writing in L2 has come a long way from Native English Speaker Composition theory to What it is today. The research in L2 writing covers, a

number of new areas such as Strategy training, writing behaviour of the ESL learners, assessment in L2 writing, needs analysis, port folio evaluation to assess L2 writing and so on.

This study analyses the efficacy of written tasks, (used along with written prompts, for the learner) to find out how far does this facilitate learners output in terms writing a paragraph.

As it is an essential criterion for learner scaffolding (i.e one of the criteria as suggested by Applebee 1983 states that scaffolding provides a natural sequence of thought and language.) this study uses ‘written prompts’ as learner scaffolding. This basic concept of scaffolding principle has been utilized for the design of tasks. Hence, the experimental group of participants are given written prompts, that serve as a scaffolding in order to write coherent paragraph, developing a single idea based on the topic.

2.Significance of the study

This present study attempts to focus on the efficacy of certain tasks used to improve the L2 writing of the ESL learners who study at a Government college in the District of Thanjavur. Though, there are many studies on L2 writing and TBL in South India, not many studies expose this type of learners and their written output.(with an entirely different social, and cultural and academic setup) with reference to coherence, linguistic acceptability and development of single idea and so on. Further it makes use of written prompts (based on scaffolding principle) for the learners.

3.Research question

Whether the tasks given, (after considering their appropriateness) for writing practice assist the L2 learner to gain, in their ability to write proficiently?

4.Profile of the participants

The participants belong to one of the Governments colleges in the District of Thanjavur-5 South India. They study English as a second language and they are aged between 19 and 20.

As they are from a rural background and had their education in Regional medium (Tamil) they cannot write in English too well but to some extent, they can write communicating their ideas. As far as their ability to write in the target language is concerned, they may be considered as homogeneous group of learners.

5. Methodology

A total number of 14 ESL students studying in one of the Government colleges in the District of Thanjavur were chosen for the study. Initially they were given a base line test on writing to know about their capacity to write in the second language. The test included a cloze passage and a free writing paragraph in about 100 words. They were given free writing practice for one hour per day for 15 days. After this, of the 14 students, Two of them were discontinued and one could not attend all the practice sessions and one did not come for the last class. Hence only 10 participants were chosen based on their homogeneity and their consistency in their attendance as well as their writing capacity.

Having decided their ability to write, they were put in two different homogeneous groups. (i.e. A. control group and B. experimental group) Each group was given almost similar type of tasks except a slight variation for group B. The experimental group of students were given written prompts to work on their topic to write, where as the control group of students were not given the said prompts. They were given topic list to choose their favourite topic and they are asked to write a paragraph. The participants from both the groups were observed and their performance (scores) was noted against their Roll numbers. Interestingly, there was a significant difference between these group of learners. Descriptive statistics has been used to analyse the scores.

6.The criteria for evaluation

The criteria for evaluation as follows

Linguistic acceptability, coherence, development of the idea

7.Results

Control Group A

| Sl No. | Roll. No. | Topic | Linguistic acceptably 10 | Coherence 10 | Development of the idea 10 | Total |
|--------|-----------|---------------|--------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|-------|
| 1 | 17BC0311 | Friends | 5 | 5 | 4 | 14 |
| 2 | 17BC0323 | Marriage | 5 | 4 | 5 | 14 |
| 3 | 17PE1202 | Ragging | 6 | 6 | 4 | 16 |
| 4 | 17PE1204 | Cell phone | 5 | 4 | 5 | 14 |
| 5 | 17PE1207 | exercises | 7 | 6 | 6 | 19 |

Experimental Group B

| Roll No. | Roll No. | Topic | Linguistic acceptably 10 | Coherence 10 | Development of the idea 10 | Total |
|-------------|----------|----------|--------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|-------|
| 1 | 17PE1201 | Friends | 7 | 6 | 8 | 21 |
| 2 | 17PE1208 | Marriage | 6 | 7 | 9 | 22 |
| 3 | 17PE1215 | Ragging | 5 | 6 | 8 | 19 |

| | | | | | | |
|---|----------|---------------|---|---|---|----|
| 4 | 17BC0303 | Cell phone | 7 | 8 | 9 | 24 |
| 5 | 17BC0343 | exercises | 6 | 8 | 9 | 23 |

8. Discussion/Analysis

- Over all, there has been a significant difference between group A and group B
- Not much of a difference with regard to linguistic acceptability for both the groups, except for a slight variation in the performance of the students 17BC0311 and 17PE1204 as against 17PE1201 and 17BC0303 (i.e. the difference between them is two marks)
- Group B students outperform group A students with regard to the following areas, namely coherence and development of the single idea
- Written prompts have helped them to strengthen their writing with reference to coherence and development
- The written prompts have given them enough assistance to work out their coherent part of their text (as the prompts have proper sequence. It was easy for the students to organize their idea coherently)
- As the prompts consist of the possible ideas for each topic, it was easy for the group B students to develop their topic easily. As this could be seen in the length of the paragraphs they have written or the number of words they have written in comparison with group A students.
- Group B students used more number of cohesive devices (it shows that they have made use of templates list given for assistance in the written prompts) than their counter parts in group A
- Group B students completed their tasks more quickly than the group A students.

9.Limitations

- It was used only with a small group of students
- The study was confined only to a college
- The study was done only with a homogenous group of students
- Creative writing on their own may be affected

10.Merits (the following merits refer to the experimental group of participants)

- they could expand the idea based on the written prompts increased their confidence level that they could write more than they thought
- kept them engaged to write rather than kept them thinking for a long period of time thinking about the topic sentence, major support sentences and minor support sentences etc...
- All had a topic sentence clearly woven into their writing task.
- They did not have task difficulty
- A number of cohesive devices was used by them
- Written prompts kept them going from easy level to a tougher level in terms of writing
- The written prompts prepared the mindset of the participants with regard to psychological preparation and self-directed learning (as referred to by Dickinson 1987)
- The self-efficacy(as pointed out by Pajares and Miller 1994) of the participants to perform the given tasks improves

11.Conclusion

Thus, the study has proved the fact that the writing ability of the students could be improved using written prompts (based on a scaffolding principle). Though one may think it

doesn't allow the natural process of creative writing, it very much helps for a normal learner of a second language to write consistently and write continuously (a basic requirement that gives confidence to a learner who writes, especially the learners from the rural background). Besides, it may be that they could improve upon their writing, after a sufficient practice with prompts, then afterwards they may be allowed to write without prompts, adding task difficulty at the next level. It could form as a first step before creating an entirely new phrases and sentences to write on the chosen idea/topic and then new associations of language is possible (as referred to by Carter 2004 as to how language enables us to create new associations, combinations and new meanings).

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